

The Mercury News

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San Jose Unified may restore furlough days, cut adult education

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Posted: 12/08/2010 06:35:22 PM PST

Updated: 12/08/2010 10:11:11 PM PST

Faced with choices ranging from tough to terrible, San Jose Unified School District officials are considering making drastic changes in 2011-12, including slashing adult education.

To the hundreds of adults struggling to get by while trying to reach the starting line for job training, proposed cuts to their basic skills and English classes feel like the last dream-crusher.

"This will destroy families," said Darsha Riley, 34, a mother of four who's working to become a medical assistant.

Irene Gonzalez, 34, who's endured ups and many downs since her husband died 2½ years ago, is barely getting by while she learns to become an administrative assistant. "We're practically homeless," she said about herself and her four children. "We really need this program."

District officials, trying to ensure that all students at least meet state academic standards, are considering creating a middle school academy, reinstituting summer school for failing students and adding back five days of instruction taken away through furloughs this year.

All that, however, would require cutting adult education by two-thirds, or \$3.5 million. Those programs are offered through the Metropolitan Education District, a joint-powers agency of six school districts. If San Jose Unified's school board, which discusses the proposal tonight, adopts it next month, MetroED would close two of its three schools. Classes such as English as a second language, GED preparation

and basic skills -- the precursor to working on a high school diploma -- could disappear.

"We are a K-12 district," San Jose Unified Superintendent Vincent Matthews said. He recommends that the district focus scarce resources on its own students, particularly struggling ones. That would mean paring down MetroED's student body from 7,300 to 2,000 students, including those who dropped out of high school or never went at all and are seeking to get basic education.

The courses already have waiting lists of more than 50 students, said assistant principal Carolyn Richardson, who thinks of her school as "the school of second chances."

In addition to basic education classes, MetroED offers such courses as painting, quilting and bridge for senior citizens. All those "50-plus" classes would be eliminated under the proposal.

San Jose Unified's proposal, coming on top of state cuts, has spawned the worst budget crisis in MetroED's 43-year history.

"It's pretty extreme in a community that really needs these services" said MetroED Superintendent Paul Hay.

Teacher Susie Berger's two-dozen-plus students range from those who can't read to those nearing

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eighth-grade education level. All are adults, some of them immigrants illiterate even in their native language, some who veered off the education track as youngsters. But in class, they focus intently because, like Riley, they're goal-driven. All showed up at MetroED either to get on track to qualify for a job, find a better one or to be able to help their own children learn.

Like other districts, San Jose Unified has siphoned away funds once mandated for specific purposes -- arts, music, busing -- to shore up general education. Now, with other sources mostly tapped and the district facing possibly \$16 million in midyear cuts this year, adult education is an inviting target.

In addition to the savings from adult education, the district proposes tapping into \$6 million in one-time federal money to meet its budget.

"A lot of people are facing a lot of anxiety," said Marisa Merino, 46. Many of the MetroED students survive on CalWORKs grants -- \$561 per month for a single parent with one child -- while trying to get through school.

"I'm showing up every day working as hard as I possibly can to achieve my goals," said Mira Gilliam, 33. Before starting at MetroED, she said, "I was in the house alone all the time, depressed and didn't want to do anything."

"We teach the most fragile of the population, the most in need of education," said Marti Rao, a curriculum specialist.

Berger sees students progress from being too intimidated to speak to being able to talk for a couple of minutes in front of the class.

"The twinkle in their eye when the light goes on,

when they can tell a noun from a verb or they stand up and recite a composition they've read," she said. "It's very gratifying."

Contact Sharon Noguchi at 408-271-3775.

San jose unified board meeting

The San Jose Unified School District board meets at 6 tonight at the district offices, 855 Lenzen Ave., San Jose, to discuss a proposal to trim the adult education budget.

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